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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE  
Bureau of Agricultural Economics  
Division of Program Surveys

July 22, 1943

PLANS AND ATTITUDES OF WINTER VEGETABLE GROWERS  
IN LOS ANGELES COUNTY

The following is a summary received from our interviewer surveying the Imperial Valley winter vegetable area and Los Angeles County.

Vegetables are grown in Los Angeles County primarily to supply the fresh vegetable needs of the large metropolitan area within the county. There are a few canneries, largely for tomatoes and string beans, and possibly some cabbage and carrots are exported. The vegetables are marketed through the "commission houses" in the city of Los Angeles, and to some extent through the medium of roadside stands. The farms are all near main arterial highways. Since the farming here is simply tucked in between towns and cities there is no extensive "rural" area. A cooperative growers' association, the Southern California Produce Growers Association, has been formed to unite the growers in their marketing demands. Formerly, most of the vegetable farm land had been occupied by the Japanese, who apparently kept a stranglehold on the market through the Japanese Grower's Association. The Japanese organization is to be supplanted by the newly formed organization.

Since most of the land was formerly farmed by Japanese, many of the present farmers are new at the business, though they claim that they farmed before and that they are even more efficient than the Japanese farmers were. The land has been taken over mostly by Mexicans who were formerly laborers in the area; partly by Chinese who have come from San Francisco; and partly, of course, by whites. A great deal of the farming is on a very small scale. Farmers may have less than five acres, and supplement their income by working out; ten or 20 acres is a good sized enterprise; and a few large scale people have as much as 100 or 200 acres. Most of the smaller farmers seem to be below the average in income for the rural people of the county. Citrus fruit is the conspicuous money-making crop, and unless a vegetable grower is operating on a fairly large scale, he is earning merely a subsistence income.

At the time of the interviewing in this county, summer production was at its height, and the market was generally very low. As a result many vegetable farmers felt that they were barely able to keep going because they were not receiving enough money to pay for the harvesting of their crops. The County Agricultural Commissioner's office is now making a survey of the situation in an attempt to estimate the seriousness of this threat of going "out of business". During the past season some vegetable land was converted into alfalfa and dry beans. And these



labor-saving crops are the ones that farmers most frequently consider as alternatives. Most farmers are pretty discouraged at present, and if they are small farmers without capital behind them, they are just squeezing through the season.

On the basis of my interviewing, it would be difficult to predict just how serious the expected vegetable shortage which the county officials anticipate may be. It is true that the small growers, mostly Mexicans, look to the nearby airplane factories as possible alternatives where they can make sure money and better wages. Since they are renting their land the transition for them would not be difficult. Those who are better established as farmers, and who may have been in the business longer, will probably continue farming. Some of the Orientals who are uninformed and fairly set in their habits of vegetable growing cling to their usual crops and their usual enterprises, and are sufficiently accustomed to ups and downs in the vegetable business to continue along the same patterns. Others, as mentioned above, are seriously considering going into low-labor crops such as alfalfa, for which there is a big demand in this area.

Plans for specific crops. Again, I did not feel that it was possible to get a clear idea of plans for specific crops, because of the large number of vegetables which are grown in this area. They are planted two to four times a year so that the picture was too complex to see clearly in a brief survey. Furthermore, the farmers themselves haven't made specific plans for the future. They say that what they plant next depends on the market. County officials blame much of the uncertainty on the Government's failure to make clear-cut statements regarding its plans for the future. Consequently, the farmer does not know just what governmental policy to expect, and is, therefore, without guidance in making his plans, however much he may wish to cooperate with the Government.

However, the general feeling is that it doesn't pay to plant what the Government asks for. Carrots here, as elsewhere, are begging for a market, but non-essential celery has made tremendous amounts of money. It is the most-talked-of money-making crop; everyone knows that the celery growers have gotten rich. Nevertheless there will be several deterrents for celery planting in the future. Since it is an expensive crop to raise the farmer must have enough capital to finance it. It is also a difficult crop to raise, and unskilled celery-growers lost their crops last year. Furthermore, whether or not it is planted will depend on future governmental policy, and the problems of obtaining labor and supplies for celery will be uppermost in growers' minds.

Early cabbage is reported to have been a good crop in the past season, and some people believe that it will be heavily planted next year if the seed shortage does not interfere.



There is considerable discouragement about the string bean situation. String beans were another essential crop, but farmers have lost money on them this year because of the high cost of harvesting and the low market price. Many of the string bean crops are simply not being harvested. Italian squash is another crop which cannot find a satisfactory market. Many of the farmers I talked to were attempting to market their squash, but felt that they were losing money by the time they harvested and marketed it.

Effect of supplies on planning for the future. Very little was said about the equipment situation. In many cases the work is done by hand, or with the aid of a mule. One farmer was hampered because he couldn't get a tractor, and one or two mentioned difficulties with their trucks in getting the vegetables to market. But, by and large, the equipment situation is not a major factor in planning for next year.

Nor do supplies of fertilizer, insect dusts and sprays, or seed seem to be on farmers' minds. The big problem is the shortage of crates and boxes. Farmers are paying very high prices for crates and feel that their slender chances for making a profit are completely lost by the high prices they have to pay for containers. They feel definitely that something should be done about this and that the prices of crates should be controlled.

Attitudes toward price controls. There is consistent and characteristic complaint about the high prices which vegetables demand on the consumers' market, and the low prices which the farmer receives. Most farmers say flatly that the "middle man" is making all the profit, and that something should be done about it. County officials explain that some high prices on the consumers' market are due to inefficiency in marketing by people who are new in the business, high prices which must be paid to clerks, and the feeling among retailers that they must maintain a high price level because of the possibility of being frozen to ceilings. The farmers do not think of these explanations, however. They feel that both the consuming public and the farmers are being cheated. Furthermore, they don't understand why they are getting such low prices. A few think of the Victory Gardens and of the present large supply of vegetables; but most, if they have any explanation at all, refer to the middleman's profits. County officials tend somewhat to blame the oversupply on the market caused by the Victory Gardens, and one suggested that the Victory Garden program should be planned so that it does not compete with the summer peak season of production.

The Los Angeles growers interviewed showed much concern about the prices consumers pay, probably because they are primarily only subsistence farmers and also because their roadside stands and nearness to the metropolitan area bring them into personal contact with consumers. One grower said he was ashamed to tell strangers in town that he was a



farmer because they gave him dirty looks and blamed the farmer for the consumer prices. When he explained the difference between farm and retail prices to them they would agree that something was wrong. Like several of those interviewed, this grower took a very personalized attitude toward the crops he raises, probably because he and his family do so much of the work. This grower disked up some of the vegetables for which he could get no price and said he did it at night because he could not bear to see what he was doing to the crops over which he had slaved.

Definitely in contrast with the Imperial Valley, the farmers are thinking in terms of price floors, and they do wish that something be done in this respect. They are losing money, and would like to see a program which would guarantee them growing costs. There is a general feeling that floors should be established as a technique for encouraging certain crops.

Ceilings, because of the poor market, have not affected the farmers. They don't feel opposed to ceilings, as long as they get a fair profit. There is the feeling that if there are to be ceilings there should also be floors, and that ceilings should likewise be placed on materials of production.

These attitudes must, of course, be interpreted in relation to the type of farmers interviewed. To many the idea of price controls was completely foreign. It had not penetrated sufficiently for them to have any attitudes at all, and the subject couldn't even be discussed with them. This general ignorance was clearly brought out when subsidies were discussed. Usually just the word "subsidy" brings a stereotyped negative reaction, but I had to define and explain subsidies to these people and then they usually reacted favorably to the idea as "something which would bring them money". County leadership is opposed to subsidies on the argument that they do not put the farmer on a business-like basis, although some recognize that they may be necessary as a wartime measure in order to keep vegetable growers in business.

There is again a generalized feeling that the Government has not done very well by the vegetable growers and that there should be a consistent program to enable them to stay in business. If the Government wants the increased production which it has urged, the farmer is going to have to see his way clear to go on producing. As I have previously explained, however, this is probably the season of the year when morale is lowest; farmers are making less money now than they have at any time during the past year.

The labor situation. Chief among the costs of production are the wages of agricultural labor. In general, farmers must pay from 60 to 65 cents an hour. Practically no use is made of the Mexican nationals in the



vegetable business, either because the farmers don't have the facilities to care for them, or because they are considered suitable only for the fruit work. Apparently they are used almost entirely by the citrus growers. There doesn't seem to be acute difficulty in obtaining an adequate labor supply, provided that the farmer can see his way clear to pay the wages. Some smaller operators do not look to hired labor at all, but depend on themselves and the children to do the work.

Recommendations: If the system of marketing is such as to exploit unduly both the farmer and the consumer, that system is obviously the key place where something should be done. I do not feel sure of the facts in the situation; if retailers' prices are being held high because of the fear of being frozen, a more flexible system should be established; if the commission houses are profiteering, they should be controlled. (It was explained to me that an effort has been made to reduce their usual 15 percent commission, but so far without success because of technical difficulties. But, on the face of it, it certainly appears that something should be done in a situation where the farmers cannot sell their products and the consumers must pay exorbitant prices.

Prices of crates have sky-rocketed. Here again, I do not know how much profiteering is involved, because the mechanics of collecting and selling the crates was not investigated. If there is profiteering, ceilings should be used; and if there is not profiteering, this would be a key point for the use of subsidy money. Or, possibly, substitute methods of packing the vegetables can be devised.

As in Imperial Valley, if there is going to be a Government program of encouraging certain crops and discouraging others, certainly the program should be consistent and profiteering on such crops as celery should be discontinued. Price floors are apparently the most popular method suggested for assuring the planting of essential nutritious crops. Certainly plans for preservation of surplus crops should go full-speed ahead so that local or seasonal surpluses can be utilized in needy areas or seasons.

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